

FIRE AND RESCUE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Fire and Rescue Scrutiny Committee held on Friday 10 March 2023 commencing at 10.00 am at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT

Cllr Bernard Fisher Cllr Wendy Thomas
Cllr Jeremy Hilton (Chair) Cllr Pam Tracey MBE
Cllr Mark Mackenzie-
Charrington

Substitutes:

Cabinet

Members: Cllr David Norman MBE

Apologies: Cllr Vernon Smith and Cllr Brian Tipper

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr Brian Tipper and Cllr Vernon Smith

2. MINUTES

2.1 The minutes were accepted pending some grammar (78.6) and formatting (77.7) corrections. The minutes were corrected and signed on the 15th March 2023

3. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

3.1 No conflicts of interest were declared.

4. HMICFRS RE-VISIT AUTUMN 2022 FEEDBACK

4.1 Mark Preece, Chief Fire Officer (CFO), presented this report. He explained that two causes for concern had been outlined from the His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspection in September and October 2021. The first was that not enough had been done to embed values and associated behaviours since the last inspection and the second was that not enough had been done to promote the importance of equality, diversity, and inclusion. In response to that inspection, Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service (GFRS) produced an improvement plan that HMICFRS had signed off in March 2022. The November 2022 re-visit was for HMICFRS to assess whether GFRS were making progress along their improvement plan. HMICFRS recognised that progress was being made, that considerable investment was being made to improve the service and that there was a robust monitoring and governance arrangement in place. Communications was highlighted as a key factor that could still be focused on further and this would be addressed with a communications action plan.

4.2 In response to a question on whether all roles necessary to completing the improvement plan had been filled, the Chief Fire Officer explained that of the 38 posts required, only 1 or 2 were still vacant. He agreed with the member that staff treatment was very important and that it was a priority to stamp out any incidents of staff members being treated poorly.

4.3 There was some uncertainty over the initial planning for 28 new roles and the current target of 38. The CFO explained that the 28 posts were bid for initially, and then an additional 10 posts were secured in a second round of bidding.

4.4 It was also explained that GFRS improvement performance was being scrutinised in meetings with Wendy Williams, the South West Region Inspector for HMICFRS.

4.5 A member highlighted a recent Local Government Authority (LGA) report that identified fire authorities that were having problems with culture. It was noted that GFRS was not highly regarded in that report and that poor culture would likely affect retention of GFRS employees, particularly female employees. The CFO explained that GFRS had the highest proportion of female staff of all fire services and that his aim was to ensure the culture fit for every member of staff. He also explained that how valued staff feel in their role depends on how they are treated and how much they are invested in.

4.6 A member asked if GFRS was using examples from other Local Authority improvement plans to help in Gloucestershire. The CFO explained that they had reached out to the wider sector through the National Fire Chief's Council to identify good practices in other services that could be learnt from. They were actively reaching out to other Local Authorities that had achieved improvements that had not yet been achieved in Gloucestershire to learn how to implement them. The CFO did acknowledge that a lot could be learnt from other examples, but that there would be certain unique cultural aspects in Gloucestershire.

4.7 In response to a question about the plans for improved communications, it was explained that bigger improvements were necessary beyond what was already being worked on. An added complication was that different staff wanted different things out of internal communications. The management team were actively considering staff feedback for decisions, taking on 10 out of 11 staff recommendations for procurement of new fire appliances. This adoption of staff feedback, however, was not always recognised.

4.8 A member asked whether further investment would be required to fulfil the improvement plan and achieve a 'good' or 'satisfactory' rating at the next inspection. The CFO explained that he did expect to be making further Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) bids, but all would be evidence based and linked to a clear service need.

4.9 There were some questions raised around uniform design and use. It was explained that there were national standards for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that would vary depending on the aimed function of the equipment/uniform.

5. SAFE AND WELL VISITS PROGRESS

5.1 The Chief Fire Officer presented this report. He explained that the number of outstanding visits was reducing with less than 2% of visits waiting more than 90 days. He also explained that they

were focusing on those who most needed the visits, with 97% of visits being completed with vulnerable residents. He highlighted that there was a high proportion of staff working on Safe and Well visits that were new and so time was being allocated away from completing visits to training and staff development. Online safe and well checks were increasing the number of houses that could be checked and were helping to highlight homes that might be problematic. Bidding had also been successful to employ two new members of staff that would focus solely on Safe and Well visits.

5.2 Members raised questions about how members of the public could access safe and well, in particular those that were deemed vulnerable or that did not have access to computers. It was explained that there was a referral pathway through Children's or Adult's Services whereby those services could flag concerns with GFRS. There were also non-GCC agencies that would refer residents on. There was also information on the website and efforts were being made to broadcast the safe and well service as much as possible. Members were also encouraged to discuss safe and well visits with their constituents.

5.3 In response to a question about why the age-related risk factors seemed to be increasing at younger ages, it was explained that some of that could be explained through modern lifestyles that affect people's health and mobility.

6. NEWENT AND WINCHCOMBE FIRE STATION SHARED USE PROGRESS UPDATE

6.1 Mike Hammond, Head of Logistics and Resources at GFRS, presented the report. He explained that of the two sites, Newent was more complex as more physical alterations were needed to be made before it could be operationally occupied by the police. Winchcombe also had some necessary alterations to be made and staff at Winchcombe were particularly enthusiastic about the police joining them. All personnel have been made aware of the changes planned. GFRS were also planning on giving the Police access to community fire stations to be used for comfort breaks whilst in the community. It was also explained that it was planned for the Police to move in April 2023.

6.2 In response to a question about revenue income from the Police it was explained that the Police were predominantly paying for the alterations to the two stations and would be making a revenue contribution.

6.3 It was also explained that equipment had been stolen from fire stations so having the police on site was a security benefit for those already working there.

6.4 A member asked if there was any reluctance from the police to the dual use of these premises. It was explained that no reluctance or concern had been raised by the Police. It was highlighted that there was already collaboration between the two services and this relationship would be further built by this sharing of premises.

6.5 It was also raised that it might be good to develop a police presence in community fire stations long-term as planned housing developments are completed.

7. GFRS NET ZERO CARBON PROGRESS UPDATE

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

7.1 John Townsend, Corporate Fleet Unit Manager GCC, presented this report. He explained that his focus was on the fleet, but that the Net Zero approach encompassed all elements of the fire service. They had identified vehicles that could be replaced with electric vehicles where possible, and those that couldn't be replaced with electric vehicles would be modernised to reduce emissions. It was explained that as a small service, GFRS had to be pragmatic with its Net Zero implementations as measures like fully electric fire engines were very expensive. A trial of solar panels on fire engine roofs had proven a CO2 emission saving and a cost-effective fuel saving and this would be rolled out to other vehicles. Fire stations were also being scoped for electrification opportunities. Carbon offsetting was being explored with fuel providers and Hydrated Vegetable Oil fuel, as well as hydrogen were being explored as less polluting alternatives to diesel.

7.2 A member highlighted the debate between using electric or hydrogen vehicles. Members also expressed concern over engines running out of fuel during a call-out. The officer explained that he was unaware of fire engines that ran on hydrogen and hydrogen feasibility would be reviewed for the next tranche of vehicle modernisation. He also highlighted that the Net Zero changes implemented in GFRS needed to be as efficient as possible without affecting service provision.

7.3 Cllr Dave Norman, the Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety and Libraries, highlighted a presentation he had recently attended that outlined the significant risk that fire services would be exposed to should Climate Change progress at expected rates. He suggested that these possible challenges ought to be brought to this committee to understand better.

ACTION – Chief Fire Officer to provide a presentation on the impact of Climate Change on Gloucestershire firefighting at a future FRSC committee meeting. DSU to add to work plan.

8. GFRS PERFORMANCE DATA AND UPDATES

8.1 The Chief Fire Officer summarised the data in the performance report.

8.2 Members raised concern around different factors that might contribute to increasing the time taken to reduce fires. Two areas highlighted were road closures and fire station distribution across the county. The CFO explained that GFRS were notified of road closures as and when they occurred. There was some discussion around positioning of fire stations. The CFO explained that a heat map of where incidents were happening and where stations were located was being produced and it was explained that fire services were a statutory consultee and could get consulted around planning of new housing developments.

8.3 A member also asked what was driving staff turnover. The CFO explained that whilst pay was often the cause for staff members to leave, retirement and maintaining work-life balance were other reasons for staff turnover.

9. IMPROVEMENT BOARD PROGRESS UPDATE

9.1 Mark Preece highlighted that of the 105 actions in the improvement plan, 30 were complete, 32 were on track, 10 were behind schedule and 3 were overdue.

10. WORK PLAN

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

10.1 The Chair asked what was in place for the planned site visits on the work plan. It was explained that the Waterwells visit would be planned for June with the Joint Training Centre visit depending on the success of the Waterwells visit.

ACTION – DSU to arrange a members visit to Waterwells fire station.

10.2 Whilst looking at items for future meetings the CFO told members that the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) had unanimously agreed a pay offer of 7% for June 2022 – June 2023 and 5% the following year. This meant that industrial action had been avoided. The Cabinet Member for Fire, Community Safety and Libraries explained that he had been assured that the cost of this pay rise would be covered in the current year's budget and there would be no pressures on the CFO to make savings to cover that pay increase.

11. FUTURE MEETINGS

11.1 It was noted that the date for the next meeting was erroneously yet to 26th March 2023. This was corrected to 26th May 2023.

CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 11.45